



## Supporting Children Returning to School After the Lockdown

Uncertainty	This is a very uncertain time and although it would be great if we could make COVID disappear- we can't (not yet anyway). Children, like us adults, must learn to tolerate some uncertainty! This skill can help us to manage anxiety.
Normalising	It is also normal to feel very anxious about the changes. Change makes most people feel a bit strange and worried. Some people find this harder than others though.
Different experiences	It's important to remember that children have had hugely different experiences during lockdown. Some children who experience anxiety normally, may have found a break from going to school, a break from triggers for their anxiety. For them going back to school is going to be very anxiety provoking. There are other children who have had a great time with families and don't want to return to school. And then of course there are many children who have been in family situations with lots of arguing, and possibly violence and neglect who will find getting back to school a refuge. Do not assume that you know how children feel.
Modelling calmness	You may be wondering whether to send your child back to school soon. You may have good reasons for wanting to keep your child at home for longer. Either way, just be aware of how you model your own anxiety when speaking to your child about returning to school. Speak to your child when you feel calm yourself.
Listening and validating	Listen to your child. Hear what their concerns are. Acknowledge their feelings and let them know that you know it's tough for them
We don't have all the answers	It's ok to not have the answers. In fact, it's better not to pretend that you know. We don't know. It's possible we may move back to school, then to lockdown, and back. This could go on for a while.
Limit news and address misinformation	If they are worried about getting unwell or making someone else unwell, agree to investigate some facts together. For example, you may look together at the facts in the news, but limit the amount viewed and address any misinformation the child has. You may want to look at what happened in previous illnesses in the past and how we got through it as a country.
Limit reassurance	Asking questions is helpful but giving excessive reassurance is not. It's very tempting to give lots of reassurance to your child, as it may relieve anxiety in the short term. In the long

	term it keeps it going. Instead listen and ask them what they think, and what they think will help.
Focus on possible strategies	Help children to focus on possible strategies. Ask them how they adapted to the lockdown. What helped? What might help them now adapt to going back to school? There may be some things that immediately can be done to problem solve the concerns raised. For example, 'I am worried that my friends won't want to speak to me at school'. Agree an experiment to try this out before hand, such as try contacting a friend to speak or meet in advance of school starting.
Deferring worries	Children can also be encouraged to make a list of worries and have an agreed deferred time to worry about things on their list. For example, at 4pm spend 30 minutes worrying. This can help to contain worries, and often the worry feels less distressing at this deferred time.
Parents preparing children for the return-routines, reconnecting with friends etc.	Before returning to school, try and prepare children by getting them back into a routine. They will need to go to bed at a reasonable time, wake up early and learn to do the school walk/ cycle/ drive to school again. They could do some practice runs to school in the week or so beforehand. If they are not already doing so, help them to reconnect with friends to make the transition easier. They can meet with one friend in a park or via zoom etc.
More contact before schools re-open for teachers and families	It may be helpful for teachers and families to have more contact before going back to school. Encourage children to share their work with school and teachers may arrange phone calls with families if possible, especially where anxieties are known. Some primary schools have Mental Health Support Teams or counsellors and it may help to run anxiety groups or transition groups for anxious children or their parents before returning to school.
Preparing children for changes	It might be helpful for parents and teachers to prepare children ahead of school starting via school websites and newsletters and that school may feel different. Classes may be smaller, they may have to wash their hands more, they may have less close contact with friends at school and stick to small groups of friends. All of this is to help keep them safe.
After returning to school make new routines fun where possible	In school, be clear about the new routines so that children have some sense of control. Help to make routines fun for example singing songs to washing hands.
Listening to each other	Teachers should listen to children and not assume how they feel or what they have gone through. Help children to listen to each other too so they can process the huge changes. It is important to not ignore the changes that have occurred.
As above limit reassurance, encourage a growth mindset.	Help children to recognise that building tolerance of uncertainty can help them manage their anxiety and develop their growth mindset. It is like building up 'mind muscles'. Limit reassurance as this can maintain anxiety. Instead encourage children to ask questions, and support

	skills in problem solving so they can consider their own solutions.
Worry box and time	Have a worry box as a class and post worries in this through the day. Have a specified time as a class or in smaller groups when worries can be thought about more.
Rewards	Use rewards in and out of school to help children manage their anxiety about getting to school and managing at school. This should be age appropriate and not too expensive.
Taking care of self and others	Encourage children to think about their own mental health including eating healthily, exercising, doing things they enjoy, spending time with others. In addition, practice being kind to self and others. Remember it took us time to adapt to the lockdown, and it will take time to adapt back. Go easy on yourself.

**By Jess Richardson**

**Principal Clinical Psychologist**

**Trauma, Anxiety and Depression Clinic**

**National & Specialist CAMHS, Maudsley**